

The Kingdom of God

By Scot McKnight

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The following are posts that Scot McKnight offered at his blog, "Jesus Creed."

Saturday, July 23, 2005

[The Kingdom of God 1](#)

Kingdom of God is Jesus' favorite expression for his mission and his aim. But what does it mean?

Scholars have gotten trapped into two boxes. First, many are preoccupied with the issue of time: did Jesus think the Kingdom was imminent, inaugurated, or entirely in the future? Far too often what that question of time is settled, kingdom is dropped. Second, others are trapped into thinking the kingdom of God is some kind of "experience" of the divine -- as if Jesus was speaking only of a personal relationship with God or some religious experience.

I am suggesting we look together at a thread of texts I have mentioned in passing before. (We could, of course, begin with all sorts of "background" issues: what kingdom means in the Old Testament, or what it meant in Judaism prior to Jesus -- all well and good. You can find all this in G.R. Beasley-Murray, [Jesus and the Kingdom of God](#).)

Today's post begins where we need to begin: with *The Magnificat* of Mary (Luke 1:46-55). Not only does it provide a plausible context for Jesus -- his mother's faith and vision (I sketch this in [Jesus Creed](#), chp. 9), but it sets out the themes that will become consistent for Jesus.

Here is what I see in *The Magnificat* as themes of the Kingdom of God.

1. God is Savior and Lord in redeeming his people (1:46-47).
2. God, finally, shows his promised mercy to the poor and humble (1:47). [The terms here speak of the *Anawim*, the pious poor, those whom Jesus is blessing in "blessed are the poor."]
3. God shows mercy to those who fear God (1:50).
4. God's Kingdom is demonstrable in "mighty deeds" (1:51)
5. God's Kingdom involves stripping the mighty and proud from their lofty places (1:51-52).
6. God's Kingdom involves giving justice to the oppressed (1:51-53).
7. God's Kingdom involves the people of God, Israel (1:54)
8. God's Kingdom is connected to the Abraham promises (1:55).

In short, Mary's vision is the realization of the long-expected hope when God will create the society he promised to his people and through his prophets. This society will be marked by justice and peace, by fear of God and holiness and mercy/love.

This is the cradle in which Mary rocked the baby Jesus. This was a new vision, yea an old vision, for a new Israel.

Tomorrow I will look at Luke 4.

posted by Scot McKnight at 5:40 AM [Read comments from readers](#)

Kingdom of God 2

What did Jesus mean by "kingdom of God," and what did he have in mind—in real world living—when he packed his vision into this expression?

A good place to start is with Luke 4:16-30. I'll cite here the pertinent verses.

¹⁶He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. ¹⁷The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:16-19, NIV)

Several observations:

1. This is Jesus' inaugural sermon in his "hometown" synagogue, and we have every right to think he is setting out his major themes. Why? Because he begins by claiming that this powerful text from Isaiah 61 is *about himself*. This is bold. However bold, it becomes central for us if we really want to know what Jesus thought his purpose was.

2. Jesus here claims *Spirit-empowerment* and he claims to be *anointed*. This latter term is connected to the word "Messiah."

In light of these two observations, we need to ask what Jesus thought this Spirit-empowerment and anointing were designed to accomplish and, so I must contend, this will lead us to an initial grasp of what Jesus thought the Kingdom of God was.

3. Jesus' Kingdom mission concerned these four groups—who probably ought not to be distinguished so much as synthesized into a larger category: *poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed*. That is, the *marginalized* and the neglected. Those who are mistreated, those who are not given justice, those who are abused, those who find no recourse...

4. Jesus' Kingdom promises: *good news, release, sight, and freedom*. Again, put together: justice in the sense of *reversal*. In these terms we see what the OT often means when it speaks of the "forgiveness of sins."

5. Many today think the last verse, in "the year of the Lord's favor," is suggesting that Jesus is inaugurating the *Jubilee* expectations of Leviticus 25. Perhaps so; I tend to think this is right. Whether or not Jesus has the Jubilee specifically in mind, what he does have in mind is the Kingdom of God as expected in a multitude of texts, including Isaiah 61 and Leviticus 25. In other words, Jesus is saying what the Lord's Prayer is saying: "may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Along the same line: many also think that Jesus omitted from Isaiah and "the day of vengeance." I'm not so convinced of this, but it is possible, in which case Jesus would be eschewing the expectation of vengeance against the Gentiles. Which would mean, Jesus has an all-inclusive vision of the Kingdom of God. Again, this is possible.

6. Now, tell me, does this sound like the *Magnificat* or what? Jesus' vision is the same vision his mother had: a socio-economic revolution in which peace, justice, and love would be rule the hearts and lives of all persons who were willing to walk with Jesus.

7. Let me emphasize something in #6: the Kingdom vision of Jesus is a Christ-centered vision rather than just an ethical vision alone. Jesus' Kingdom is one that has *him* at the center, and not simply an abstract sense of justice (I've blogged on justice before and I'll avoid repeating myself). Thus, his vision is not

"social justice" the way many use it today, but "God's idea of what is right" (and he is just about to teach what that means in the Sermon on the Mount).

8. Those who heard Jesus were impressed by his *graciousness* (Luke 4:22). Is it not inherent to the word *grace* that it is inclusive, forgiving, restoring—of all sorts, especially the marginalized? The "grace of Jesus" is God's concern for the marginalized and he thinks it should come into realities now—in the real world.

9. The kind of "sin" Jesus has in mind is *systemic* as much as it is *personal*. There is a problem in Israel: it manifests itself in the abuse of power and the abuse of the poor.

10. Jesus was rejected by some of his townsfolk for his vision of the Kingdom of God.

11. If you were asked, "What is the gospel of Jesus?" how would you answer it?

We are not done yet; tomorrow we will look at Luke 6 (Matthew 5 - 7).

posted by Scot McKnight at 7:12 AM [Read comments from readers](#)

Monday, July 25, 2005

[Kingdom of God 3](#)

Kingdom of God is the central vision of Jesus, and today we want to look at the Beatitudes in Luke 6:20-26. It is tempting to expand such a consideration, and look at all of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain. I'll leave that to you.

In the Beatitudes of Luke (Matthew's differ slightly, and we'll avoid noting all those differences), Jesus says this:

	Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
21	Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.
	Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.
22	Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.
	23 ^a Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.
24	But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.
25	Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.
26	Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.

There is a clear contrast between the poor and the rich, the hungry and the full, the weeping and the laughing. Jesus blesses the former and utters woe to the latter.

It is a mistake to think this a list of virtues, as so many have done. The Beatitudes may indicate behavioral traits, but what the beatitudes do more specifically is "bless" *specific groups* to whom Jesus says God will show his final mercy as the Kingdom of God is established. Jesus is saying that in the Kingdom of God there will be the poor, the hungry, and those who weep -- along with those who are persecuted because of their association with Jesus. This Kingdom will exclude those who live contrary to God's will.

In other words, the goal isn't to go out and be poor, or starve yourself so you'll be hungry, or become sad so you can weep, or even go out and do something to get persecuted. No, what needs to be seen here is that Jesus sees the inauguration of the Kingdom underway, and he says this first set of people are the ones who will be in it, and the second group won't.

The Matthean list, which is sometimes treated as nothing but a list of virtues, needs to be seen for what it is as well: it is a contrast with those who are not those things: the poor, the mourning, the meek, the righteous-seekers, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted *are in contrast* to the rich, the laughing, the haughty, the power-seekers, the unmerciful, the pure in externalities only, the warmongers, and those who are persecuting.

Put together, we have a seamless thread from Mary to the Beatitudes: the Kingdom of God is the *society* in which the will of God is done, and it is a society for *anyone* who will join up with Jesus and live as he teaches. This society, however, will surprise many for it will not be directed by the powerful, but populated by the pious poor and marginalized who simply do what Jesus calls them to do, who simply long for God's will and God's justice to be established so Israel can be the community God has called it to be.

When we see Kingdom, we need to think "society." When the nation and then later the entire Roman Empire didn't respond, this little "society" became more accustomed to "church" instead of "Kingdom," but "Kingdom" has always been the larger, more encompassing vision that Jesus has for us.

posted by Scot McKnight at 5:31 AM [Read comments from readers](#)

Tuesday, July 26, 2005

[Kingdom of God 4](#)

Today's text is Matthew 11:2-6. John the Baptist, in prison, gets disciples of his to find Jesus and ask Jesus if he is "the one who is to come" or not.

(Note: "the one who is to come" is from Malachi 3 - 4, and it is possible that Jesus actually says, "No, I'm not that one who is to come. I'm someone else; you can find me in Isaiah, John.")

Jesus answers John's query. What is *very important* here is this: Jesus is, in effect, telling John the *purpose* of his very mission. Here are his words:

"Go and tell John what you hear and see:
⁵the blind receive their sight,
the lame walk,
the lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear,
the dead are raised,
and the poor have good news brought to them.

Several observations:

1. What Jesus is doing is visible.
2. Jesus is restoring the marginalized back into the society.
3. Kingdom work means giving sight, enabling to walk, cleansing lepers, giving hearing back, raising the dead, and giving good news to the poor (=Anawim; think Mary; think Beatitudes).
4. Kingdom works centers around Jesus himself (verse 6).

The Magnificat, the inaugural sermon, the Beatitudes and the response to John in prison: all the same. The Kingdom of God is concerned with creating a society in which injustices are undone, in which all persons are welcomed to the table, and in which Jesus is the host at the table.

Let us reflect for a moment on the significance of these texts. *The Magnificat* declares the heart-felt yearning of Mary; the inaugural sermon sets out what Jesus' mission will be, and it will be shaped by the prophecies of Isaiah; the Beatitudes declare who it is that will be found in the Kingdom; the response to John announces how Jesus understands what he is doing and what it means—and again, he refers back to three texts from Isaiah (29; 35; 61).

The Kingdom of God vision of Jesus was about a society in which God's will would finally be established and which would empower all people to sit at his table in joy.

Tomorrow, we jump ahead to Acts 2 and 4 to see what this Kingdom society looks like after Pentecost.
posted by Scot McKnight at 5:54 AM 19 comments

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Wednesday, July 27, 2005

[Kingdom of God 5](#)

The big difference one notices in entering into the early churches is this: kingdom language is largely dropped and ecclesia (church) language is picked up. There all kinds of issues here, not the least of which is that as the Church trotted into its first decade the community became convinced of its "sectarian" status rather than a ruling status and this accounts for some, not all, of its switching of languages. Along with this is that it became increasingly effective in the Roman Empire and its status was less and less of a power. (I don't buy that it gave up its vision for Kingdom, but its language did shift as it realized its status.)

Having said that, and there is more to be said about it, we need to look at *the nature of its earliest communities* to gain an idea of what they say as central to the mission of the gospel in the earliest churches.

Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35 are indicative of its central ideals and concerns. Which are:

1. Devotion to the apostolic teaching, who are mediators of the teachings and life of Jesus.
2. Devotion to fellowship (which is continuous with Jesus' table fellowship as an inclusive kingdom community).
3. Lord's Supper (probably the best understanding of "breaking of bread").
4. Prayer.
5. Spiritual power, noted in Spirit-inspired wonders.
6. Economic liability for one another.
7. Worship practices.
8. They were known for being good people (2:47).

Here is Spirit-inspired and Christ-centered community that survived beyond the resurrection. It is a socio-economic, power-denying, fellowship with a mission to spread a Spirit-empowered gospel about Jesus Christ to its communities for the good of other and the world. The chapters of Acts 1--15 will show its struggles with inclusiveness, but they worked at being an inclusive community, regardless of one's economic or ethnic make-up.

Ecclesia, in other words, is not what happened after Christ but what happens when the power of the Spirit makes possible that Kingdom vision of Jesus.

Let me put it this way, if not a little harshly: we should not think, "Too bad for Jesus, born on the wrong side of the Cross and Resurrection, and not able to preach the Spirit-inspired message." Pentecost did not end the Kingdom vision of Jesus, it enabled it.

Any vision of the Ecclesia that does not begin with Jesus' vision of the Kingdom is a denial of Jesus' Lordship and a misunderstanding of the New Testament.

Tomorrow: Peter's view of the Ecclesia.

posted by Scot McKnight at 10:10 AM [Read comments from readers](#)

Thursday, July 28, 2005

[Kingdom of God 6](#)

Today we explore the *Ecclesia* theme of 1 Peter, and do so as part of what Jesus envisioned in speaking about the Kingdom of God. What we are most interested in is how Peter saw the relationship of the Ecclesia (church) and the State with its powers.

Tomorrow I will look at Paul. And it will not surprise you if I say that I think Jesus' Kingdom language and Paul's Salvation language have been too often separated from one another, as if Jesus is for "society" and Paul for "individuals."

1 Peter is (perhaps) the first sustained statement on how the emerging Christian movement of the 1st Century should relate to the State.

Here is the fundamental principle for Peter:

¹¹Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. ¹²Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Peter 2:11-12)

First, the Christians are socially-oppressed. "The aliens and exiles" is seen by many ([JH Elliott](#); I do so in my [1 Peter \[The NIV Application Commentary\]](#)) to be the social status of the Christians rather than seeing them as "pilgrims on earth."

Second, the Christians are exhorted to be holy. This is a theme in chapter 1 and throughout the letter.

Third, they are to be good citizens. 1 Peter uses a term "to do good works" (2:15, 20; 3:6, 20) that is important here. Bruce Winter, in his book, [Seek the Welfare of the City](#), demonstrates that Peter would have had in mind here doing benevolent actions for the good of the city: helping build buildings, monuments, etc.

Fourth, these principles are to work themselves out in every relationship: State, employment, wives, husbands, church (2:13 - 3:12).

Fifth, the "beachhead" for this work is the community of faith -- a theme very important to 1 Peter.

We need to ask, why did Peter see it this way? Did he want to be good to keep Rome off his back? Did he want to be good so he could have a chance to witness? Did he want to be good in order to impact society for the Kingdom? Yes for each question. But one thing is sure: he didn't give up the idea that God's Kingdom would fill the world.

posted by Scot McKnight at 5:00 AM [Read comments from readers](#)

Thursday, July 28, 2005

[Kingdom of God 7](#)

The Apostle Paul's view of *Ecclesia* is consistent with Jesus' view of Kingdom (*Basileia*).

For Paul, Kingdom is primarily Eternity or the Final Future Kingdom (see 1 C or 15:24), though he does use it in a way that makes me think he sees the Ecclesia as the primary manifestation of the Kingdom in the present world (Rom 14:17).

If we recall our comments on *The Magnificat* and Jesus' inaugural sermon, and recall the socio-economic emphasis on restoring humans to the Table, then I think we are to see three themes in Paul's Ecclesia that derive directly from these central teachings of Jesus.

First, for Paul the Ecclesia is the *Body of Christ* (1 Cor 12--14). It is a society that functions properly.

Second, for Paul the Ecclesia is a *pneumatic body* (again, 1 Cor 12--14). It is a society enlivened and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Third, for Paul the Ecclesia is a *radically new society* wherein old distinctions are gone and new creation lives. "Neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female..." (Gal 3:28).

Fourth, for Paul the Ecclesia is an *alternative society to the Empire of Rome* and the intended goal for all peoples. When we begin to think in terms of the future, kingdom language takes over.

Finally, for Paul the Ecclesia is a saving presence for the entire world. Notice these words from Romans 8:

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; ²¹because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8:19-25, RSV)

Put together now:

The Kingdom of God is the society in which the will of God is done and, in the hands of the early Apostles, this Kingdom society morphs into the "Church" as they move into the Roman Empire. But, in so doing, they do not drop the central social and global concerns of Jesus but demonstrate that they think through the Spirit these social concerns will be enlivened and empowered. What is also important is that they see the Church in more "sectarian" terms than Jesus saw the Kingdom -- which makes sense: they are small part of a huge machine (Roman Empire) while he had claims on the entire nation of Israel.

(A nice little survey of this can be found in David Wenham, [Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?](#) and in [Paul and Jesus: The True Story.](#))

The Church, as I see it, is an alternative society of Jesus designed to witness to and work for the redemption of the world.

So what does this tell us?

The first and most important lesson is that we need to be very careful when we make comments that suggest Jesus' teachings are not consistent with Paul's when it comes to Kingdom and Church. Paul (and Peter) were driven by their status in the Roman Empire and by the smallness of the movement to set up local missional communities of faith and to concentrate their concerns there -- but their vision was the same as Jesus'. Kingdom of God, when "on earth" looked like "in heaven."

Second, it means that Paul's whole theology of salvation -- terms like justification, atonement, and the like -- are part and parcel of how the Ecclesia is formed, and this too is consistent with Jesus. Paul was not a radical individualist who thought exclusively in terms of individual salvation. This misunderstands Paul. Paul is an Ecclesia-theologian -- a practitioner who starts up churches, revs them up, and then moves on for more of the same. But, always, Paul is concerned with missional communities and not just isolated worship centers.

Third, and my final comment on this series on the Kingdom, is that the gospel is designed to accomplish just this: ***The Kingdom of God, in the context of a community of faith (Ecclesia), for the good of others and the world.*** The gospel does its work through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the empowerment that comes from the Holy Spirit.

posted by Scot McKnight at 8:50 AM [Read comments from readers](#)

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